

How Writers Write Fiction 2016: Storied Women

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>> Welcome to How Writers Write Fiction 2016: Storied Women. My name is Christopher Merrill. I'm a poet and a writer, and I direct the International Writing Program here at the University of Iowa.

>> I'm Margot Livesey. I'm a novelist and story writer, and sometimes, essayist. And I teach at the University of Iowa, Writers' Workshop.

>> So the question is, since we are on our third MOOC in writing fiction, why Storied Women?

>> The answer is because even now, many writers, many women writers, many writers of all genders grow up reading almost without knowing it, mostly white, mostly male writers. And it's often so much part of the oxygen we breathe that we aren't aware of it.

I think I was probably well into my teens before I noticed that my father's bookshelves were nearly all men with a few women, George Eliot and the Brontës sort of huddled together for safety. And of course, that just doesn't do justice to the complexity and the subtlety, and the richness of contemporary life or of our experiences.

But one interesting aspect is that I think, women writers have to work as hard as all other writers to really do a good job of getting women characters on the page. It doesn't follow just because we're women that we're better at writing women. We typically need to work just as hard, perhaps sometimes a little bit harder to capture and make vivid and diverse our women characters.

>> And in this course, we hope to explore many different ways to do exactly that.

>> And one of the huge pleasures of reading is that it crosses gender, race, age, culture. It's a truly democratic, truly cosmopolitan, truly universal activity.

>> We were speaking earlier of that wonderful non-fiction book by Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, where the women gathered together to talk about these books that cannot be talked about in the classroom anymore.

>> And it's a wonderfully subversive group. They've discussed, for instance, Jane Austen, and as well, of course, as *Lolita* which is a much more racy book. But their discussion, they enter so fully into these novels from very different cultures and classes.

>> And what they're doing is inhabiting other lives which is what we imagine happens in the best fiction, right?

>> Completely, I mean it is I think one of the great pleasures of writing is that you can have a life larger than your own, a life beyond your own. It's a privilege to be able to sort of step imaginatively into the lives of other people, other characters, I suppose I should say.



I feel in some ways, almost like I'm here under false pretenses, because I was very slow to discover or realize that one could study writing. I thought, you just sat behind the parlor door like, Jane Austin, or sat in a nice room by the river like, Gustave Flaubert and wrote a great novel.

And when I did enter a classroom, a workshop at the age of nearly 30. I was amazed to discover how much I could learn from not just my teacher who was wonderful, but from my fellow students. And many of the writers in that first workshop became good friends and remain my first, very cherished readers, and the people I go to when I'm stuck or need inspiration, or criticism, or savage advice.

>> And part of the beauty of this Massive Open Online Course is that you have the chance to make friendships with writers from all kinds of communities around the world. That's what we will be doing here.

>> And I tell my student, and I never did a formal MFA, but I tell my students in workshops now, either here or at writers' conferences, that they can learn in six weeks or six months, what it took me six years to learn.

That being in a class doesn't teach you things that you can't find out on your own, but it vastly accelerates that learning process.

>> So enjoy.